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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/14/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [PBTS](#) [MD](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIAN MFA UNCLEAR ON TRANSNISTRIAN REFERENDUM
IMPLICATIONS

REF: A. STATE 115371

[B](#). CHISINAU 381
[C](#). MOSCOW 7769

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Alice G. Wells.
Reasons: 1.4(B/D).

[1](#). (C) Summary: In a meeting with Embassy three days before Transnistria's September 17 referendum, MFA Transnistrian negotiator Valeriy Nesterushkin provided no clarity on how Russia will treat the referendum result. While acknowledging that whatever the result, Transnistria would not be recognized by the international community, Nesterushkin contended that the referendum should at minimum be accepted as an expression of the will of the entity's population. He saw no direct link between the referendum and the negotiation process, but thought that negotiators, especially those representing Transnistria, will behave differently after the referendum and that change of attitude, in turn, will affect the course of further discussions. Nesterushkin advised that all parties of the 5 Plus 2 should study the post-referendum situation carefully and avoid imposing a one-sided resolution. End summary,

Smirnov not Saddam Hussein

[2](#). (C) Nesterushkin began his September 14 conversation with Poloff with a "simple example." An internationally recognized state -- Iraq-- was "destroyed" by another country because of the alleged existence of WMD, without the international community's approval. A referendum then was carried out by the newly-created government so that "the people of Iraq" could decide their future. Smirnov, Nesterushkin said, is not Saddam Hussein, and the planned referendum is an acceptable way to collect information about Transnistrians' opinions and should be taken as such. Nesterushkin argued that Transnistrian authorities felt compelled to hold a referendum after Ukraine introduced a new customs regime in March (reftels). A more constructive U.S. role, Nesterushkin said, would have been to help formulate the wording of the two choices instead of belatedly criticizing it. He denied that Russia was directly involved in the wording of the referendum, repeatedly saying that "It was their work." Transnistria, isolated and in a dire economic condition, appealed to Russia and Moscow provided humanitarian aid and financial support (not to help Smirnov, he added). Nesterushkin repeatedly insisted that the referendum was not Russia's idea and Russia would have preferred the status quo.

Terrible Mess, Terrible Divorce

[3](#). (C) Nesterushkin characterized the Transnistrian dispute as a terrible mess. His "partners (i.e., the 5 Plus 2 negotiators)" tend to oversimplify the situation and impose

their own ideas of an acceptable settlement. He stressed that although Transnistria was part of Moldova under the Soviet Union, Transnistria declared its independence in 1990 before the republic of Moldova was established in 1991. One cannot call Transnistrians "separatists" when they were never part of Moldova. Nesterushkin said the EU, the U.S. and the OSCE all fail to understand the complicated history and dynamics and simply continue to pressure Transnistria with their own solution. He considered this too confrontational. According to him, the situation is like a broken marriage. The couple went through a bloody divorce in 1992. All sides including Russia, however, keep telling them that they should live under the same roof. As the couple keeps fighting, we must present a new marriage contract that is attractive to both parties.

What Next?

14. (C) Despite prodding, Nesterushkin would not speculate on what role Russia ascribed to the referendum. He insisted that he could not be concrete because he did not know but thought the future negotiations would be tough. Despite the wording of the questionnaire, he saw no likelihood of the immediate annexation of Transnistria to Russia. It may join Russia's economic sphere with the same currency at some point but beyond that, he did not want to hypothesize. Nesterushkin said that he was puzzled why he was not invited to a meeting among DAS Kramer, OSCE Moldovan HOM O'Neil and the EU representative last week. He was willing to listen if they have a new workable solution.

Comment

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15. (C) This was vintage Nesterushkin. While Duma Chairman of International Relations Committee Kosachev told the Ambassador on August 31 that the GOR would not endorse the referendum results, Nesterushkin's comments reflect the ambivalence Russia has shown about the referendum -- by turns supportive of the Transnistrians while recognizing that the referendum is unlikely to affect the course of the negotiations. Moscow has been comfortable with the status quo and the referendum will do nothing to change that. We will be seeking GOR reaction next week after the referendum results are announced.

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